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STAGE-FRIGHT

By EUGENE GRUENBERG ¹

STAGE-FRIGHT is the name given to a certain condition of the human mind and body, as yet not fully defined. It is not restricted to any age, nor to any rank. Anybody may be a victim of that most singular fright: a king or a pope, when receiving homages; a general or an admiral, when giving the "ordre de bataille;" an actor or musician, when going on the stage; a surgeon when getting ready for an operation; a beautiful girl, when entering the ball-room; and even a waiter, when bringing the orders.

At "*Brébant*," the famous Paris restaurant, there was a waiter whose chronic perplexity became proverbial and a topic of much comment among the patrons of that establishment. When you called him, he blushed; when you gave your order, he turned pale; and when you asked him questions as to the menu, he lost all control of himself. He was at his worst, however, when compelled to wait on ladies. Then he either lost his power of speech altogether, or he just managed to stammer and to utter some florid nonsense. He mixed up the orders, exchanged the soup with the desert and brought you spinach instead of oysters. At a wedding banquet, he succeeded in dropping a full plate of tomato soup on the bride's lap and a dish of wild duck with mushrooms and brown gravy on the bridegroom's head.

We have reported this elaborate story to its full length in order to illustrate to what extent stage-fright can possess its victims. We may add that it can be encountered in many varieties and forms, under as many different names; e.g., audience fright, lamp fever, scene fever, pulpit fever, cannon fever, travelling fever, examination fever (driving not a few to suicide), and even—stage-fright by proxy, as Mr. Kielblock has termed it. He tells the following incident:

A lady had consented to let Thalberg, the great pianist, use her piano, as his own instrument did not arrive in time. Long before the recital she began to feel uneasy, and this sensation kept growing, until, when her piano was at the platform and exposed

¹For the material used, the author is indebted to E. Kielblock's booklet, "Stage-Fright," as well as to several stray articles found in divers magazines, papers and books.

to the concentrated gaze of many eyes, it culminated in an outburst of a most malignant type of "lamp fever," which seems so much more remarkable, as the lady was not even present at the concert!

The fact is known that men of matchless bravery lose their countenance when they have to address an audience orally; and that novices on the stage easily become victims of a more or less stubborn spell of fright. That veterans of the stage who hardly knew what stage-fright meant, all of a sudden become afflicted with that trouble, is less known and harder to understand.

Charles de Bériot, the worshipped master of the violin, after travelling for years all over Europe, flying from triumph to triumph, when settling down as a teacher at the Brussels Conservatoire, became possessed by stage-fright so much that he could not be induced to play to an audience or even to his pupils.

It is hard to believe that artists like Paganini, Liszt, Edwin Booth or Sarah Bernhardt could ever have been victims of stage-fright, and it certainly would be interesting to discover whether that evil was known to the ancient nations and felt by their celebrated orators, musicians, actors and gladiators.

We are confronted with a mysterious phenomenon and ask ourselves: What is it? Is it nervousness, embarrassment, confusion, disconcertedness, shyness, diffidence, agitation, timidity, presentiment, hypochondria, superstition, or all, or none of them?

Darwin calls it "the consciousness of a great coming exertion with its associated effects upon the system."

It is not real fear one feels when confronted with the "concentrated gaze of many eyes." It is something appalling to most, at least for the first time. Some never get over it, and some begin to suffer from it in later years. It seems to be some magnetic or other influence which goes out from a crowd to an individual, as some American writer said. "One against a thousand," to quote Mr. Kielblock, "no wonder that the débutant is overcome by a sense of isolation, or forlornness, or helplessness and ready to sink through the ground."

That stage-fright is a *disease*, pure and simple, has been almost universally accepted among scientists. But, unfortunately, they have omitted to make the diagnosis complete by stating the very nature of the disease.

After devoting much time and study to this problem, I have arrived at the conclusion that stage-fright is nothing else but a species of *temporary insanity*, impairing the correct balance of

the mind to such an extent as fundamentally to annihilate the control of all the mental and physical capacities and energies for the time being.

The victim, when at home, is at his best and able to perform to perfection. On the stage, he is given up to paralyzing influences of the "bacillus of fright." He is utterly unable to rule his nerves; he trembles all over; and is actually unfit to accomplish the first and simplest requirements of technique, not to speak of the demoralized condition of his memory which makes it impossible to deliver his task with authority, skill and soul. He is enwrapped in the most dreadful conglomerate of dismal thoughts, and he feels as one who expects to receive the death blow any moment; or, at least, to become the sufferer of some unspeakably terrible accident. He is surrounded by enemies who are dying to see him break down and get into every kind of trouble which can be found under the sun. He cannot get rid of the idea: how awful it would be if he should forget his part; or, if the string should break; or, if something else should happen to him. And also he is tortured by the thought that Mr. X., the most severe critic in town, is present, as well as Miss Y. and Mr. Z., his acknowledged and hateful rivals. Even people of keen personal courage become the most pitiable cowards, when under the influence of the stage-fright bacillus.

Now, as the existence of that "bacillus" can hardly be questioned, it remains for the observing scientist to examine and to study its nature and the means of its eventual extermination, in order to eliminate or to cure a disease which is bound to destroy all chances of any success, well deserved as it may be.

To begin with, it is known that thousands of players and singers who could perform their part to perfection *before* the public appearance, made often an utter failure when on the stage. Also, that *most* of these soloists, after being through with such a wretched performance, have declared that, were they allowed to play or sing their piece over again, *on the spot*, they were sure they could render the solo to the greatest advantage and satisfaction. What follows? That the germ of the disease is of a very short-lived capacity; viz., that it does not exist before or after the performance. At least, this may be considered to be the rule, while there is no doubt that, in some cases, the disease makes itself felt for some time before, but hardly ever after the performance.

It also seems evident that the bacillus must be created by some irregularity within the body and mind, the condition of which cannot possibly be called sane.

It stands to reason that, according to the famous sentence: "Mens sana in corpore sano," every possible care and precaution should be taken by the soloist to observe all such rules and devices as are indispensable for the establishment of a most normal, sane and comfortable condition of the body.

Although we do not intend to recommend the extensive use of any other but the most simple and natural means as *possibly helpful* remedies, it may not be out of place to mention a few of the styles favored by some great artists in order to overcome the dreaded evil.

In the long list of preventives, we find several of a harmless nature, as water, milk, raw eggs, lemonade, chocolate, malt-extract, ice cream and bonbons; then those of a less innocent reputation, as coffee, tea, cigarettes, snuffing tobacco, beer, porter and champagne; and lastly, those which are positively injurious; viz., whiskey, morphine and opium.

Among all the special advices given by acknowledged celebrities, the following appear to be conspicuous:

Mrs. E., one of the greatest singers, made it a rule, before going on the stage, to take off her stockings and have her soles patted, as a sure means to put to flight any trace of fright or nervousness.

Fasting a whole day is the remedy used by Miss L., a famous vaudeville star, as a positive protection against any symptoms of stage-fright.

Mrs. B., the wonderful actress, never wears a corset when playing, as it may have a tendency to cause a very troublesome congestion in the head.

Mr. R., the famous tenor, insists on a most extensive practice of breathing exercises, while one of his colleagues declares nothing can compare with the beneficial influence of gymnastics.

All seem to agree that *flowers* are very injurious, especially to singers. Nilsson and Calvé, as well as other authorities, have directly warned against the use of hyacinths, violets, lilacs and many other flowers as a means of trimming.

If *we* were to decide which of the many remedies is to be considered the best, we would answer as the old sea-captain did when asked which one of the 28 unfailing remedies against seasickness he thought to be the best. "Don't use any of them!" he said.

Once more, we may point to the necessity of keeping one's health in good order, and to the wisdom of favoring the simplest and most natural means in every possible way. Over-exertion

of any kind should be avoided; also in the line of professional occupation. To practice ten or twelve hours a day may qualify the player automatically to perform a piece, even in the case of being prevented by stage-fright from properly directing the fingers; but this course is bound to prove fatal to the health, and it will hardly ever insure an inspired rendition of the task.

Frequent walks, breathing exercises, gymnastics, good food, plenty of rest and, speaking in general, regularity and moderation will, without any doubt, bring about a bodily condition as normal and comfortable as desirable and conditional for the success of a soloist.

We have tried to prove the necessity of a perfectly healthy condition of the *body*. But we shall see that it is still more important to use all means in order to bring the *mind* into a state of steel-like strength and sanity.

The simplest task requires undivided attention—absolute concentration. If we allow our thoughts to desert the subject of our present occupation, and to indulge in a wandering trip around the world, the work accomplished will not be a success, but a failure, especially on the stage.

Unfortunately, it is almost the rule that, instead of devoting every bit of the intellectual capacity, which means the concentrated power of logic and energy, towards the solution of the task, a soloist will waste most of his thinking upon ghostly phantoms of imaginary dangers, which are only useless speculations, exciting, detracting and leading astray. That will never do. *Concentration* is the key to success.

But there is another element of equal importance, and that is *inspiration*. There is no blessing on a performance without inspiration. A performer must draw happiness and delight from every tone he produces, as the nightingale does. And it is safe to believe that the very source of the beauty and powerful influence of Orpheus' music upon men, beasts and stones was inspiration. Why did Orpheus sing? Because inspiration drove him to do so, and because he delighted in it. And why does the nightingale sing? Because she delights in it. And therefore, we delight in her song. Before starting her lovely performance, she is not looking around to see who is going to listen, and whether the leading critic of the town is present. Nor does she indulge in the use of any stimulants, like café noir, cigarettes or champagne, to improve her courage. She gets her courage out of the open air she is breathing. You should do the same. But you do not know how to breathe. *Very few people do!* The air feeds

the body and keeps us alive. Many think they are living, but the fact is that they are dying by degrees, because they do not breathe enough.

It is not hard to guess how a person will play on the stage after having been lingering around in the stuffy atmosphere of the "Green Room" or behind the stage, like a culprit, waiting for his decapitation or electrocution, and shaking in his shoes like an eel in jelly.

Now, inspiration is a unique phenomenon which appears like a meteor and which is not always on hand, but which often has to be created artificially, even by the best; and everybody should endeavour to discover his individual source of inspiration. We know that all the great ones of this world had their own way of finding as much inspiration as they needed for their work. Here are a few facts which have been reported of some men conspicuous in the kingdom of art.

Haydn took refuge in prayer and rosary; Beethoven in the open air and nature; Mozart in paper and ink—that was all he needed. By the way, Alexandre Dumas (father) declared that a fine quality of paper was a real source of inspiration to him. Wagner depended on costly robes of silk and velvet, saturated in rich colors; Rossini on orgies of a culinary order; Tschaikowsky needed air and trees; Halévy the noise of a tea-kettle; Auber a horseback ride; Johann Strauss wine and cigars or a game of "Tarok;" Suppé a good dose of snuffing tobacco. Donizetti was at his best when fixing his eyes at a distant point; Ambroise Thomas, when lying in bed; Balzac, when clothed in a monk's cassock; Châteaubriand, when walking around barefooted; and Gluck, when at his piano, placed in the midst of an open field, in sunshine.

Travelling as a "star" involves a grave danger for the inspiration. The artist who goes from place to place uninterruptedly and who finds his home in the sleeping car or in the hotel, finally loses that tender and delicate sensation which really creates the warm interest for the problems of his art. To him, the listeners are but two-legged numbers and the concert-pieces he plays only the samples of a travelling drummer. To be sure, there is no such thing as stage-fright for that artist, but alas, there is no artistic impression either, nor spontaneity of enthusiasm. Everything becomes just a matter of financial speculation. Otherwise, art and public are quantities of no interest to him.

To be spared the sufferings of stage-fright would indeed be a gain, but with the price mentioned above, it would certainly be

paid for too dearly. The performing artist must never lose his *sympathy* for the work he is to deliver, and he should, therefore, never attempt to perform without trusting himself to the blessed influence and protection of inspiration.

Many artists are victims of an incredible *superstition*. In their conviction, the loss of a button, or the tearing of a seam, must not, by any means, be repaired by needle and thread, or something is bound to happen. Rather remedy the trouble with one hundred safety pins.

To wish a soloist good luck, before his facing the audience, is also considered a thing very dangerous and to be avoided and, of course, Friday and the number 13 are features dreadful to many.

To wear new shoes the first time at a performance is a daring which will prove most fatal, indeed, unless one puts the right shoe on the left foot and vice versa, which positively brings good luck; and, generally speaking, to put on any piece of cloth or garment *wrong side out* is always an assurance of excellent luck.

Very common is the use of charms, amulets and talismans, all of which are supposed to protect most powerfully the owner against any kind of mishap. These objects of superstition are indispensable in the household of several nations, especially in Italy and in the Balkans. Of course, superstition is incurable, when inoculated from early childhood.

In the spectacle called "public appearance," there are two more quantities to be taken into consideration: the *audience* and the *critic*. There are different audiences and different critics.

An *audience* can be warm, cold, enthusiastic, blasé, well-trained, ignorant, appreciative and generous or reserved as to applauding. But there is hardly an audience which could not be *influenced* by certain circumstances, like political or social events, by critics, good or bad, and last but not worst, by the so-called "claque."

Sometimes an audience is misunderstood. The Leipsic and Boston audiences, for instance, have often been called cold. But surely, they are not cold. Their almost icy reserve is only the surface of most passionate under-currents. It is hard to imagine more tempestuous and boisterous demonstrations of applause than those we have witnessed in these two art centers after many of their favorite performances.

It is dangerous to speak of *critics*, but we may venture the risk.

We can learn a great deal from a fine and experienced critic, and we may learn something from a poor one, too, as he may, like

a blind hen, find a kernel here and there. Therefore, one should carefully read all criticisms. But one should not take all of them to heart too seriously. Not all critics are reliable. Some are prejudiced, moody, easily influenced by personal sympathy or aversion, not to mention those who are directly dishonest. Many a career has been checked, if not ruined, by the attacks of certain critics who have become more influential than they should have been. And not everybody is as great as a Richard Wagner who gloriously outlived his critics.

How much, or rather, how little some critics deserve to be taken seriously, can be seen from a characteristic remark which was made with regard to Mr. S., then one of the best known critics of Vienna. It was after the performance of a new and ultra modern piece, when director H., the famous wit, exclaimed: "That fellow would pay a fortune, if he knew whether he likes it or not!"

This is what Alexandre Dumas (fils) has to say about the critics in the "Figaro":

Certain works appeal to certain temperaments of a certain age and milieu. What seems a masterwork to some, is rot to others. Immortal poets, composers and artists have been condemned by some of the most acknowledged contemporary authorities.

But nobody's place in the gallery of fame will be decided upon by the labels pasted upon him by the honorable critic.

There is no old and no new school. But there is such a thing as inspires, delights and consoles, and which remains beautiful and good and which will not perish.

It would be very unwise to start any argument or controversy with a critic. Critics may be good or poor, but we need them and we should try to benefit by their utterances, whatever they may be.

Disciples and artists of the younger generation should remember that their best and truest critic will always be their *teacher*. His severe judgment will never fail; it will decide whether you are up to the mark of your task. If he finds you are sufficiently prepared, you may feel encouraged by the thought that the responsibility rests almost entirely upon him.

To summarize: We believe that stage-fright is a disease and also that it is curable. It must be fought more with the mind than with the muscles.

As in every other disease, favorable conditions will facilitate the solution of the healing problem. Such favorable conditions must be created in many directions; viz.:

(1) *Know your task.* Do your best to prepare yourself as well and to come as near perfection as may be.

(2) *Secure a perfectly correct and comfortable condition of the body* by observing all rules and precautions of a sanitary order.

(3) *Forget the audience*, when you enter the stage.

(4) *Depend on Concentration and Inspiration.* Concentrate your mind upon your task, and thinking of its beauty, try to do justice to it, so you may yourself enjoy it to its full extent.

(5) *Have an excellent accompanist*, and be sure to arrange for as many rehearsals as necessary.

(6) *Plenty of breathing exercises* near an open window, before going on the stage, will marvelously enliven, strengthen and inspire you.

Discipline yourself to control your nerves, your will power. People paying for admission expect to receive satisfactory impressions, not only upon the ear, but also upon the eye. A person shaking like an aspen leaf and showing the expression of a candidate for suicide is no pleasant sight. The audience does not feel inclined to sympathize with one imploring their pity and who should have staid at home instead, as they think.

A few encouraging, cheering words from a friend or mentor, and the affectionate pressure of a chum's hand, just before going on the platform, will be a helpful assistance to the bashful débutant.

The opportunity of confronting an audience as often as possible should be earnestly sought for. It is the very best means of preventing the fatal "mal de stage." To face an audience should strike the soloist like an every-day occurrence.

It should not make any difference to the soloist whether he has to play for kings or popes, for angels or devils, or just for an ordinary audience.

It is an excellent plan to invite a few friends and play for them, first in concerted music, and then as a soloist. The oftener and the earlier in life this is done, the better it will work in the end.

Very welcome are also such preliminary performances as the so-called public rehearsals, helping the player immensely to abstract his thoughts from all that the mind may otherwise constantly and morbidly be dwelling upon.

Minor shortcomings, caused by the influence of heat, dampness or other circumstances, should never be taken to heart so much as to ruffle one's serenity. Even mistakes of a stronger calibre happen to great artists. As a rule, they are hardly noticed by the audience, and it certainly does not impair one's success, if

there is a little squeaking of the strings or any mishap of a similar order.

Try to remember the old and good saying: "Nothing is bad, but thinking makes it so." Therefore, do not torture yourself by thinking day and night of the accidents and troubles which may or may not happen.

Know your task well, and you will enter the stage with all the confidence and pleasure you enjoy when taking a refreshing swim on a hot August day.

If you succeed in this, you will always be in full control of the situation, you will never fail to give your very best, and you will have solved the problem of establishing for yourself a condition of absolute immunity against the attacks of "stage-fright."